

## Introduction to the Forum: The American West in World History

The American West in World History sounds very specific for a Forum in *World History Connected*. But within that short title lies a world of possibilities. The story of the American West is the story of many diverse Indigenous peoples, it is the story of snowcapped mountains and low-lying deserts. It is the site of competitive colonization and voracious progress. Where people of many nations came to seek wealth and often found barriers imposed by fear and xenophobia. The story of the American West is a micro history that reflects the macro history of our world. By placing the American West into the practice of World History, we afford our readers, fellow scholars, and students an easily digestible nugget of history that can build a broader historical lens. The American West offers perspectives on intersectionality as so many different stories have been written there over the centuries.

There is a mythology that has long loomed over lands full of wide open prairies, gold fields, buffalo herds and passage to the Pacific Ocean. That mythology went hand in hand with the concept of Manifest Destiny and the national project of America. Historians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century like Frederick Jackson Turner placed the West in a purely nationalistic framework tying the encroachment of white settlers to the expansion of Americanization.<sup>1</sup>

But the West he envisioned was never truly American or mono racial. By the late 20th century, Patricia Limerick's *The Legacy of Conquest* and Richard White's *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own* opened the study of the American West to a broader interpretation focusing on the experiences of Native Americans, Mexicans, Asian Americans, Chinese and Japanese immigrants and workers of all stripes as well as the environment.<sup>2</sup> This Forum looks to take those multi-cultural stories and place them in a broader global framework. As World historians we look for the interplay between regions, economies and people over the specific history of the nation state. So, while we use the title American West, we are simply referring to the western reaches of the North American continent and beyond as a place-marker for the multitudes of histories that have intersected the region. As a place so hard to define due in part to that vast diversity

of its landscape and its people, these specific papers on the American West provide us with a guide to navigate that massive and impressive history.

We begin with Janne Lahti, a scholar of the American West who has written extensively on the need to incorporate the stories of the region into World History discussions.<sup>3</sup> While Americans may have wished to impose the myth of the West on the narrative of the region, some Europeans wished to exploit that myth. Amateur Swedish scholar Gustaf Nordenskiöld is a prime example of the European fascination with collecting (in reality stealing) Indigenous cultural artefacts. In 1891 Gustaf visited Mesa Verde, Ancestral Puebloan lands, as part of his world tour. His tour took a major detour when he decided to kick start his academic career by amassing a collection of Puebloan artifacts which eventually went on display in Finland. The 2020 return of some artifacts as well as ancestral remains from the Finnish National Museum to the Hopi people is not the end of the story though. Struggles by numerous countries and Indigenous people to reclaim their cultural heritage from foreign powers illustrates the lasting impact of colonization on people the world over.

Two pieces illustrate the importance of channels of transportation in the drive for empire. The first piece from Graydon Dennison, a rising scholar from Temple University, explores the connections between Panama and America's westward expansion. While the narrow isthmus of Panama had long been utilized as a route from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, it gained new importance for gold seekers rushing to California in the late 1840s and 50s. In order to take the isthmus of Panama, the gold seekers wishing to cross it to California needed to make it more "American." In other words, Panama wasn't just a point of access to the American West, it was a keystone in the American expansionist project. The American expansion westward established a precedent for overseas expansion. But American expansion was itself rooted in the Anglo-Saxon notions of exploration and conquest at the heart of British imperialism. In "Catastrophes with Consequences" Henry Jacob, Environmental Humanities Fellow at Yale University, examines the tragic failures of two expeditions pushing to gain access to the West and Pacific Ocean. The first, the tragic search of British naval officer John Franklin for the Northwest Passage, and the second American Isaac Stain's search for a passage through Panama. Jacob has included a delightful lesson plan on interoceanic transit through the Americas which is sure to engage any student in the discovery of maritime history and imperial maritime ambitions.

Prussian naturalist Alexander von Humboldt saw a direct link between Panama and western expansion as argued by University of California San Diego Visiting Scholar, Sandra Rebok. Her piece illustrates the role of scientists and naturalists as agents of empire and key players in the development of global interconnectedness. While Humboldt himself never set foot in present day California, he understood the importance of the lands which today constitute one of the largest economies in the United States. Humboldt's broad influence and far reaching publications of the 19<sup>th</sup>

century spurred international interest in California. And his synthesis of observations illustrated the role California would play in a globalized world.

Back in the desert, we wrap up with Matthew Herbst, on a personal quest to understand the pull of this barren landscape to travelers over the years. As director of the Making the Modern World program at the University of California San Diego, Herbst provides a salient perspective on the changing significance of place in the West. His passion for providing experiential learning to students, through environmental engagement, shines through in his descriptions of his own learning process in the desert. In the lexicon of the mythology of the American West, the desert holds the smallest space. A place of protection and sustenance to the indigenous Cahuilla, Kumeyaay and others, it became a place to be conquered and controlled for later Spanish and American expeditions. Today, Slab City, located in the Colorado Desert of southern California is home to a community of people escaping the bonds of modernity and city life. Somewhat like gold rushers, trampling across Panama to reach their fortunes, migrants to Slab City seek to build and control their own futures and in so doing, write new meaning into the placemaking of the American West.

The “West” holds a romanticized place in the global imagination. In this imagination it is a landscape of heroes and villains, hardy immigrants and exotic others. A land of wilderness to be explored and tamed and all by the willing and the free. This myth has been captured in song, story, movies and television. The reality of the American West is far different, however. As the essays in this Forum argue, The American West is a microcosm which captures all the forces of world history in one place. Environmental shifts, Indigenous place making, colonial demands and the resistance to those demands, migration and immigration, boom and bust cycles, and the dreams and desires of multitudes write large over an epic and idealized landscape. In short, the American West is a metaphor for the triumphs and tragedies of human history on this earth.

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**Vera Parham** is Associate Professor of History at American Military University. For the past thirteen years she taught various history classes for online universities as well as the University of Hawaii. She gained her PhD in Native American History from the University of California Riverside. Her research and publications focus on the use of protest by various Native American groups and individuals of the Pacific Northwest in the quest to preserve and protect culture and heritage. Lexington Press published her latest book titled, *Pan-Tribal Activism in the Pacific Northwest: The Power of Indigenous Protest and the Birth of Daybreak Star Cultural Center* in 2018. She is also the Vice President of the World History Association of Hawaii and has presented papers on Indigenous struggles for survival at numerous conferences. Her publications appear

in several anthologies as well as journals focusing on Native American and Public History. She can be reached at vera.parham@mycampus.apus.edu.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1894).

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987). Richard White, *“It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own”: A History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Janne Lahti, *The American West and the World: Transnational and Comparative Perspectives*, (NY: Routledge Press, 2019).